

wilderness recommendation

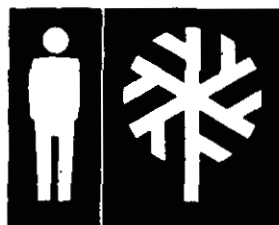


WHITE SANDS



NATIONAL MONUMENT • NEW MEXICO

WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATION



**White Sands
National Monument
New Mexico**

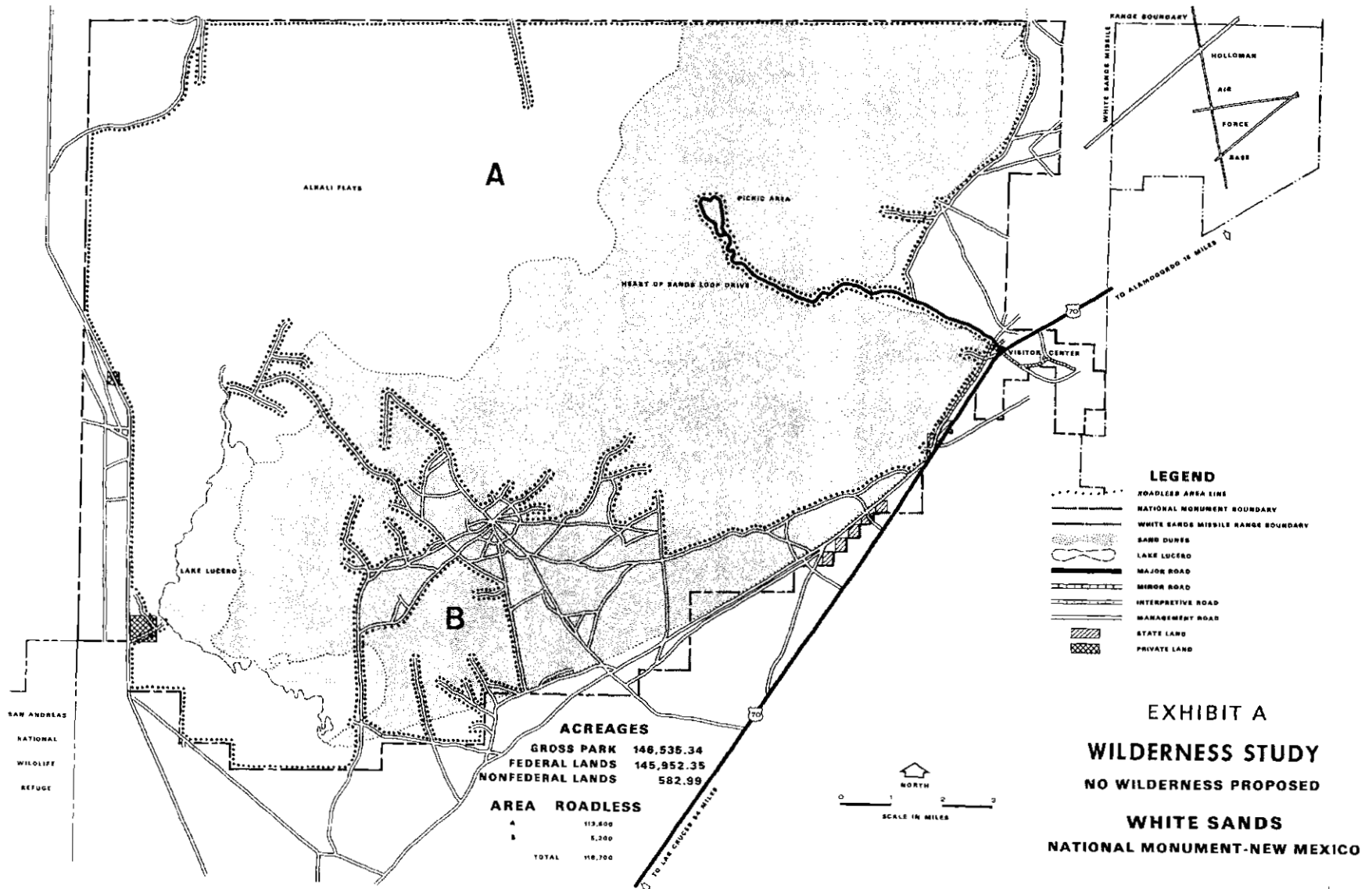
August 1972

RECOMMENDATION

1

NONE OF THE LANDS IN WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT ARE SUITABLE FOR WILDERNESS DESIGNATION AND INCLUSION IN THE NATIONAL WILDERNESS PRESERVATION SYSTEM AT THIS TIME BECAUSE OF CURRENT MISSILE AND SPACE ACTIVITY.

THIS RECOMMENDATION IS BASED UPON CAREFUL STUDY OF THE ROADLESS AREAS, THE VIEWS PRESENTED AT THE PUBLIC HEARING, AND THE WRITTEN RESPONSES CONCERNING THE PRELIMINARY WILDERNESS STUDY DESCRIBED IN THE APPENDED HEARING OFFICER'S REPORT.



SUMMARY OF THE PRELIMINARY WILDERNESS STUDY

THE NATIONAL PARK

White Sands National Monument, which encompasses 146,535 acres of land, is a superlative geological area that was established by Presidential proclamation in 1933. The area illustrates the complete story of gypsum sand, its formation into dunes, and the dunes' movement. This largest and most impressive of the world's rare gypsum deserts exhibits shimmering snow-white dunes in a vast ecological island.

LOCATION

White Sands lies in south-central New Mexico at an elevation of 4000 feet, in the almost flat Tularosa Basin, between the rugged parallel ranges of the San Andres and Sacramento Mountains. Alamogordo, New Mexico, is 15 miles to the northeast.

Bus transportation is available in Alamogordo, New Mexico. The nearest airport with regularly scheduled commercial flights is 12 miles from the monument. El Paso, Texas, is the nearest major center for public transportation and is 90 miles from the monument. Transportation from terminals to the area is limited to taxi and rental cars. Primary access to and circulation in the area is by private automobile.

SURROUNDINGS

The monument is completely surrounded by the White Sands Missile Range. This operation is under the U.S. Army, Department of Defense. The only public access to the monument is from U.S. Highway 70 near the southeast portion of the area.

RESOURCES

Over half of the monument is dominated by the gypsum dune field. This includes four distinct types of dunes: embryonic, transverse, barchan, and parabolic.

Alkali flats cover the entire northwest portion of the monument and extend southward to Lake Lucero, a wet-weather lake, in the southeast corner of the monument.

The small remainder of the monument is brush flats and a few brush-covered knolls.

VISITOR-USE FACILITIES

White Sands National Monument has had close to 615,000 visitors in a single year. Nearly 115,000 of these visits occurred in August. Eighty

percent of the visitation is during a 100-day summer period between June and September. The remainder is scattered over the rest of the year with peak periods during the Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving holidays.

The majority of people visit the "heart of the dunes," where the dune drive terminates with a loop. Picnicking and restroom facilities are available at three locations. A smaller number of the visitors enjoy the visitor center and museum exhibits.

Two environmental study areas are used for instructing students from the Alamogordo and nearby schools.

Scheduled trips to Lake Lucero are arranged in the spring and fall. These arrangements require coordination with the White Sands Missile Range, and about six escorted trips a year are made to the lake site and crystal beds.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRELIMINARY WILDERNESS STUDY

White Sands National Monument, containing nearly 230 square miles of land in Otero and Dona Ana Counties, New Mexico, was established by Presidential proclamation on January 18, 1933, to preserve the world's largest gypsum dune field. The area illustrates the complete story of sand and dune formation and movement. This largest and most impressive of the earth's rare gypsum deserts exhibits snow-white dunes in a vast ecological island 10 miles wide and 30 miles long. Rain and snow erode the gypsum deposits and carry the material into Lake Lucero in the southwest corner of the monument, which is the lowest part of the Tularosa Basin. Sun and wind cause evaporation of the lake; then, southwest winds carry the sand-size grains from the bed of Lake Lucero and the alkali flats, adding to the nearby dunes.

The entire roadless area, totaling 118,700 acres or 81 percent of the monument's 146,535 acres, was studied for recommendations concerning its wilderness suitability. Much of the roadless area is in a "zone of cooperative use" with the White Sands Missile Range, and all of the roadless area is under the path of projectiles whose intended impact point is outside the monument.

In 1963, the Secretary of the Army was granted a special-use permit, also referred to as a cooperative-use agreement by the Secretary of the Interior to conduct technical tests over the land area of White Sands National Monument, and upon a portion of that land area, in connection with the experimental phases and testing of space and/or aerial vehicles and other related materiel used for the White Sands Missile Range operations.

The Department of the Army recognizes White Sands National Monument as an area maintained by the National Park Service for the public interest. The Department of the Army desires to effect the preservation of the monument and to keep the area's impairment at a minimum, concurrently with recognition by the Department of the Interior of national space and missile programs and the necessity for experimentation and testing of materiel in connection with these programs.

Since much of the firing is on an experimental basis, unintentional impacts can and do occur on any part of the White Sands National Monument, as well as on a wide area around the monument. The material from these impacts is recovered by helicopter when possible but is mostly collected by wheeled vehicles. Occasionally, a crane or backhoe is necessary.

The Wilderness Act states in Section 4 (b): "Except as otherwise provided in this act, each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character." The Act further states in Section 4 (c) "There shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area."

12

The probability of future adverse impacts within the roadless areas and the necessary removal of missile and missile debris by motor vehicles and mechanical equipment precludes preservation and management of the roadless area in a wilderness condition under the mandates of the Wilderness Act. Therefore, the roadless areas of White Sands National Monument are found not suitable for wilderness designation. There is no doubt, at some future date when this experimental missile range is no longer necessary, that sizeable areas of White Sands National Monument will be proposed for wilderness, but Defense Department officials state that such a possibility is a number of years away.

CONCLUSIONS

As required by the Wilderness Act, a public hearing was held on the preliminary White Sands wilderness study in Alamogordo, New Mexico, on April 1, 1972. Notice of the hearing appeared in the *Federal Register* on February 1, 1972, and in local New Mexico papers on the same date. Approximately 40 persons attended the hearing, and 26 oral statements were presented. A total of 570 responses were received.

Of the public agencies, private organizations, and individuals testifying or submitting written views, seven of the agencies, three of the private organizations, and 194 of the individuals supported the proposal not to establish wilderness. Twenty-one of the private organizations and 273 individuals favored wilderness designation. One public agency and 65 individuals favored wilderness in general with no specific recommendations, and six public agencies acknowledged receipt of the study but had no specific comments about it.

Conservation groups proposed the establishment of a wilderness area of approximately 130,900 acres, which is described in the appended Hearing Officer's Report and is shown in Exhibit C. With the exception of three roads for which corridors would be allowed, all other roads within the proposed wilderness boundary would be closed by the Park Service. The wilderness boundary would be flexible, following the edge of the road right-of-way as it moves around because of the shifting dunes, but total acreage should not change. This proposal was given careful, lengthy, and thoughtful consideration in the evaluation of the oral and written statements concerning a wilderness area in the White Sands National Monument. However, this proposal for wilderness is not recommended for the following reasons:

The missile impact and recovery program under the cooperative-use agreement with the Army is incompatible with the mandates of the Wilderness Act.

The future plans of the White Sands Missile Range include a portion of the zone of cooperative use for testing and evaluating missiles. Since it is a permanent base, the use of the missile range will continue into the indefinite future,

14

In the event the military ceases to require the zone of cooperative use for missile experimentation, a proposal for wilderness could then be recommended.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George B. Hartzler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "George" being the most prominent.

Director, National Park Service

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

September 21, 1972

Dear Mr. Speaker:

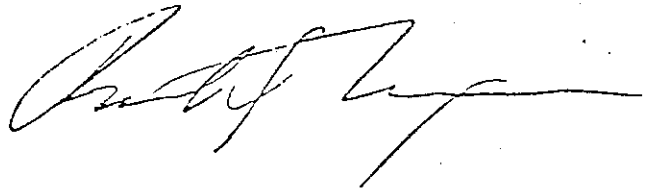
Pursuant to the Wilderness Act of September 3, 1964, I am pleased to transmit herewith proposals for sixteen additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

As described in the Wilderness Message that I am sending to the Congress today, these proposed new wilderness areas cover a total of nearly 3.5 million primeval acres.

Two other possibilities considered by the Secretary of the Interior in his review of roadless areas of 5,000 acres or more -- White Sands National Monument, New Mexico, and Padre Island National Seashore, Texas -- were found to be unsuitable for inclusion in the Wilderness System. I concur in this finding and in the sixteen favorable recommendations of the Secretary of the Interior, all of which are transmitted herewith.

Concurrent with the wilderness proposals, I am also transmitting the Eighth Annual Report on the Status of the National Wilderness Preservation System which covers calendar year 1971.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be "R. M. Nixon", written in a cursive style.

Honorable Carl Albert
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D. C. 20515